

A HELPING HAND

DRUM finds out more about Teachers Across Borders South Africa

BY NTOMBIZODWA MAKHOBHA PICTURES: MARTIN DE KOCK

HE'S a chemistry and physics teacher at Phillips Exeter Academy, a private school in New Hampshire, America.

He's been a teacher for 14 years, but coming to South Africa made him take a fresh look at his subject.

Michael McLaughlin, a 37-year-old former deputy sheriff, who left the United States police force to study science instead, is one of 10 dynamic teacher-volunteers who came here as mentors for Teachers Across Borders South Africa (Tabsa).

TABSA is a not-for-profit organisation that works to improve maths and science teaching and learning in remote schools in rural areas.

The organisation invites some of the best-qualified science and maths teachers from top private schools in America to volunteer their time and resources in South Africa where they engage with teachers from rural areas.

The brainchild of expatriate teacher Yunus Peer, the organisation is quietly making a difference in the lives of millions of rural learners.

Joining Tabsa as a volunteer teacher can cost as much as R27 000, as you have to cover your own flight costs, but the programme is so popular that American teachers are willing to raise their own funds.

What motivated Yunus to start the organisation in 2001 is a keen grasp of how 40 years of apartheid disadvantaged black learners, along with a spirit of activism and passion for education inherited from his late father, Cassim Peer.

In 1973, when Yunus was a teenager, police confiscated his passport, preventing him from returning to Waterford Kamhlaba United World College of Southern Africa in Swiland. Three years later, when his passport was returned, he left the country to study in America.

Yunus went on to earn a degree in Psychology and Education and a Master's degree in Public Administration. He later pursued his career at one of America's most highly rated schools, Punahou School in Honolulu, Hawaii.

In the past 13 years Tabsa has offered skills training and mentoring to nearly 4 000 teachers from rural schools in five provinces, and impacted well over one million children.

"We assist teachers and schools with limited resources by creating a curriculum that meets and exceeds the National Curriculum standards



LEFT: Yunus Peer (front row, third from left), founder of Teachers Across Borders South Africa, and volunteer teachers.



ABOVE from LEFT to RIGHT and INSET: Teachers Across Borders South Africa aims to give rural schoolchildren access to the best maths and science education available.

in maths and science," Yunus explains.

"Children in rural areas have no laboratories to work in, so we encourage teachers to use everyday materials, cooking ingredients and household materials or recyclable materials to create their experiments."

TEACHERS who attend Tabsa workshops can also download a CD with workshop materials and free lessons from the organisation's website.

Tabsa runs two concurrent projects: providing school uniforms to rural school children in need, and establishing fully equipped computer labs in rural schools.

Currently, eight Tabsa-provided computer labs at schools in four provinces are benefitting 4 000 learners annually, and 250 children have received full uniforms – mainly in rural KZN.

"Children who don't have school uniforms are often stigmatised and some end up not going to school," says Thokozani Mteshane, who has been part of the Tabsa project from the start. And after many years of being mentored by Yunus in NGO

administration, Thokozani became an associate director of Tabsa last year.

WAVERING support for the project from the Education Department is a source of frustration for Yunus.

Despite a few setbacks and near-cancellations, Yunus and his team are continuing their excellent work. He is now considering expanding the project to Swaziland, Botswana or Rwanda in about two years.

"We have had many opportunities fall through the cracks because we did not receive the support we needed from the department," Yunus says.

"Sadly it is the teachers and students in the rural school classroom that suffer." ■

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